

Possible Uses of CBASS Measures of After-School Effectiveness

Prepared by Elizabeth Reisner, Policy Studies Associates, Inc.

The Collaborative for Building After-School Systems (CBASS) has identified a need for standard measurement tools to promote its goal of bringing high-quality after-school systems to scale. In the Collaborative's own words:

In order to have more children and teens benefit from participation in high-quality after-school programs, the field needs standard measurement tools that hold programs accountable for quality, that test the productivity and success of programs, and that have the potential to demonstrate after-school's contribution to the successful development of all children and youth. To this end, CBASS partners are working to identify a small number of broad, research-based measures that relate directly to the goals and objectives of after-school programs and have a low burden of measurement for providers so that they are easy and cost-efficient for local systems to adopt.

The after-school field needs standards and tools for evaluation, separate from the indicators of academic achievement used to judge schools, that demonstrate more broadly how after-school contributes to student success and especially to their high school completion. Public and private funders have supported the development of various program quality and youth development measurement tools, but they have not been widely adopted in part because they may be too expensive to implement at scale. Without a practical and cost-efficient measurement framework, after-school will continue to be held accountable for improving test scores, thus distracting providers from their youth development mission and causing policymakers, funders, and education leaders to undervalue after-school's contribution to the successful development of all children and youth.

To develop the means for addressing these objectives, CBASS has identified a small number of after-school effectiveness measures, as shown in the accompanying matrix. The measures reflect conditions known to increase the likelihood that a youth will develop the skills and personal assets necessary to stay in school, graduate from high school on time, and mature into a productive citizen. The measures listed in the matrix include only concrete program elements and observable conditions.

These measures can support CBASS partners as they build their capacity to track and assess their own progress in increasing the scale, quality, and effectiveness of after-school opportunities in their respective communities. Some measures included in the matrix won't be relevant to some after-school intermediaries, although certain others may be relevant to all.

CBASS partners could decide to use the matrix in any of several ways. For example, CBASS partners might decide to identify a few measures that all partners would agree to use and a larger number that partners would be encouraged to use as relevant to the organization's mission, objectives, and developmental stage. In addition, CBASS partners might share their own information with other after-school stakeholders and join forces in public reporting on certain measures of particularly high priority.

The matrix is divided into sections corresponding to levels of accountability among after-school systems developers. These include child and youth participants, individual programs, and the overall system.

Columns in the matrix provide detail on each suggested measure:

- ***Measurement method.*** Cells in this column describe methods often used in applying the measure for data-collection purposes. The approaches listed are those typically found to provide accurate information at the lowest cost in time and effort. This list provides examples only and does not include every possible measurement method.
- ***Inference level of measure.*** In general, evaluators try to adopt measures that require the least possible background knowledge or judgment (“inference”) to apply. Such measures are likely to be applied with high levels of reliability, meaning that different people applying the measure are likely to arrive at the same rating or other response on the measure. Low-inference measures are thus particularly desirable for data-collection purposes.
- ***Measurement burden on programs.*** Again, low is good. CBASS partners and programs have many responsibilities. Minimizing the time and effort required for measurement benefits everyone.
- ***Applicability across age groups.*** CBASS partners serve children and youth of all ages, and they need to know which measures are most relevant to program participants of particular age ranges.
- ***Interpretation and prior use.*** Information in this column indicates briefly the underlying rationale for the measure and its possible interpretation. For several measures, prior studies using the measure are cited.

The measures listed in the matrix were identified from a longer list of after-school performance measures in current use across after-school and out-of-school time evaluations. Readers may be interested in the attached list of possible measures from which the measures in the matrix were selected. CBASS selected the matrix measures based on their level of administrative burden, relationship to student success and high school completion, and applicability across after-school systems.

Attachment

Original CBASS List of Possible After-School Measures

Program Quality

Structural and Organizational Features of Programs

(a) Program policies

- Adoption of explicit program quality standards
- Adoption of program outcome goals for youth participants
- Availability of program services every day that school is in session
- Availability of program services on weekends and during school vacations
- Positive social norms that are consistent with those of the community
- Links to students' schools and teachers, including procedures for wrapping around and supporting Supplementary Educational Services in the after-school hours
- Evaluation procedures to promote accountability and continuous improvement
- Arrangements for transportation at the end of program sessions, if needed

(b) Program setting

- Physical and psychological safety
- Low youth to staff ratio
- Availability of adequate space, facilities, equipment, and learning materials

(c) Youth outreach

- Employment of staff with responsibilities for youth and parent outreach and communication
- Outreach practices to engage the broadest spectrum of youth, including youth with handicapping conditions, youth of varied racial/ethnic/language groups, and youth of varied ages
- Procedures to link youth with available after-school activities that match their needs and interests
- Procedures to encourage high program attendance

(d) Links to families and community

- Communications with families to inform them about the program and about their child's experiences within the program
- Encouragement of family participation in program planning and activities
- Encouragement of volunteers and inclusion of volunteers in staff activities

(e) Staff qualifications and working conditions

- Staff who are qualified for their program assignments, in terms of education and experience
- Payment to staff for participating in program planning and for improving their program-related skills
- Low turnover of staff

(f) Personnel policies and professional development

- Staff supervision and performance feedback to promote program quality
- Opportunities for staff to work toward relevant educational credentials
- Opportunities for staff promotion based on job performance
- Professional development that is designed to build specific staff competencies and knowledge over time and that reflects staff needs and priorities

Process and Content Features of Programs

(a) Practices to promote positive relationships

- Opportunities for after-school participants to exercise leadership
- Opportunities for participants to form positive relationships with staff and peers

(b) Rich program content

- Content that is tightly aligned with program goals
- Opportunities for skill building, especially in reading and math
- Diverse activities
- Cognitively challenging activities
- Exposure to new experiences (especially for middle grades and high school participants)

(c) Varied content-delivery strategies

- Explicit sequencing of activities to address program goals
- Active, hands-on learning opportunities
- Opportunities for activity choice
- Opportunities to apply academic skills in practical contexts
- Opportunities for cooperative learning within groups, including extended group projects
- Opportunities for sustained cognitive engagement
- Opportunities for learning outside of the regular program location (especially for middle grades and high school participants)
- Positive management of participant groups to maximize the contribution of all group members and meet activity milestones

Youth Participation

Participation Frequency

- High average daily attendance in after-school programming, measured in number of days per year and in percent of available days attended per year

Participation Duration

- High year-to-year retention of participants in after-school programs

Breadth of Activities in Which Youth Participate

- Documentation of the number and type of activities in which each youth participates

Youth Outcomes

Outcomes Within the Program

- High program attendance
- Positive relationships with peers and adults
- Sense of belonging
- Attachment to the program
- High task persistence
- High perception of academic benefits of program participation
- High levels of collaborative interaction among participants

Outcomes Outside the Program

- High attendance in school
- Low incidence of risky behaviors
- High academic self-esteem
- High academic motivation
- High task persistence
- Positive work habits
- Understanding of the value of schooling in shaping one's adult life
- On-time grade promotion
- High report-card grades in subjects relevant to after-school program content, especially reading and math, and in behavioral domains
- High attainment of skills, as assessed through tests and (for high school youth) credit accrual for on-time graduation
- On-time graduation from high school

System Enhancement and Growth¹

Development and Implementation of Essential Operating Systems

- Capacity to track youth participation over time, with data aggregation and reporting at both participant and program levels
- Capacity to recruit, hire, train, and supervise well-qualified staff
- Capacity to evaluate program operations, youth participation, and youth outcomes and to feed evaluation findings back to programs and the CBASS member organization itself for continuous improvement
- Capacity to generate stable financial support for program operations

Development and Implementation of Structures for Collaboration and Joint Action

- Formation and regular convening of a leadership group of program directors
- Schedule of regular leadership meetings with recorded agendas and minutes
- Action plans with milestones to implement the intermediary's priorities

¹ The categories and measures listed here are derived mainly from my own observation and experience, and from Bodilly and Beckett (2005).

Development of Political Support for Increasing After-school Program Scale and Quality

- Continuing assessment of unmet after-school need, to inform the public and political leaders and to identify location of new program sites
- Continuing communication of evaluation findings and other information to public and political leaders
- Consistent participation in legislative and appropriations hearings and debates regarding after-school and related youth services
- Strategic alliance with other influential parties that share common objectives for youth and community development